

The Early Industrial Revolution—Maintaining a Sense of Community

Read the following documents and answer the questions at the end.

Document A

The new urban agglomerations were drab places, blackened with the heavy soot of the early coal age, settling alike on the mills and the workers' quarters, which were dark at best, for the climate of the Midlands is not sunny. Housing for workers was hastily built, closely packed, and always in short supply, as in all rapidly growing communities. Whole families lived in single rooms, and family life tended to disintegrate. A police officer in Glasgow observed that there were whole blocks of tenements in the city, each swarming with a thousand ragged children who had first names only, usually nicknames—like animals, as he put it. . . .

Hours in the factories were long, fourteen a day or occasionally more; and though such hours were familiar to persons who had worked on farms, or at domestic industry in rural households, they were more tedious and oppressive in the more regimented conditions that were necessary in the mills. Holidays were few, except for the unwelcome leisure of unemployment, which was a common scourge, because the short-run ups and downs of business were very erratic during this period of bewildering expansion. A day without work was a day producing nothing to live on, so that even where the daily wage was relatively attractive the worker's real income was chronically insufficient. Workers in the factories, as in the mines, were almost entirely unorganized. They were a mass of recently assembled humanity without traditions or common ties. Each bargained individually with his employer, who, usually a small businessman himself, facing a ferocious competition with others, often in debt for the equipment in his factory, or determined to save money in order to purchase more, held his "wages bill" to the lowest possible figure that he could manage.

R.R. Palmer and Joel Colton. *A History of the Modern World*. 5th ed.
(New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), 423-424.

Document B

Some village mill owners provided schools for children whom they employed. The first was Samuel Slater's Sunday School, established in Pawtucket in the 1790s as essentially a secular institution for teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic and modeled on similar English schools. Other mill owners convinced the local town to establish a district school nearby. Like rural schools that operated only during those times when children were not needed to help on the farm, mill village schools were in session only a few months a year.

To encourage social order and regular behavior, village mill proprietors often gave land to any religious denomination willing to organize and build a church. The Baptist Fiske family of Fiskdale, Massachusetts, went a step further and provided its workers with a church of the owners' choice . . .

The work force in cotton mill villages was ethnically homogeneous in the early nineteenth century. It consisted mainly of New Englanders of British extraction and some British immigrants. Beginning with Samuel Slater, British immigrants for many years provided a significant number of skilled workers required in textile manufacturing.

The overwhelming majority of production workers were native born and this would remain so until the late 1840s and the early 1850s.

Gary Kulik et al., eds. *The New England Mill Village, 1790-1860*
(Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1982), XXVIII, XXIX.

Document C

Imported goods were expensive. For everyday necessities the farmers continued to rely upon craftsmen in Rochester, and their insatiable demand turned the village into a manufacturing city. More than half the adult men in Rochester were skilled artisans, most of them engaged in turning local raw materials into finished goods for sale back to the countryside. The sixty-five workshops of 1823 concentrated on the necessities and little luxuries of rural life: guns and nails, shoes, hats, woolen cloth, wagons, furniture, farm tools—even jewelry and mirrors. These last testify to a growing prosperity and urbanity in the countryside. . . .

In 1820 most Rochesterians worked, played, and slept in the same place. There were no neighborhoods as we understand them: no distinct commercial and residential zones, no residential areas based upon social class. The integration of work and family life and of master and wage earner produced a nearly random mix of people and activities on the city's streets. . . .

The reorganization of work brought change into the most intimate corners of daily life. . . . On most jobs, employment was conditional on co-residence. Even workmen whose fathers and brothers headed households in Rochester lived with employers. Work, leisure, and domestic life were acted out in the same place and by the same people, and relations between masters and men transferred without a break from the workshop to the fireside. . . .

Wage earners were young and poor and numerous. Left alone, they might cause trouble. But with each of them a member of some household, and with householders answerable for the behavior of everyone under their care, the community could breathe easy. Public opinion held heads of families accountable for what their "children and dependents" did. . . .

Rochester proprietors had migrated from villages in which the public peace was secure. In the villages the more troublesome outsiders and dissidents were expelled. The others were governed by household heads, the disciplinary machinery of the church, and the web of community relationships. . . .

Liquor was embedded in the pattern of irregular work and easy sociability sustained by the household economy. It was a bond between men who lived, worked, and played together, a compliment to the unique kind of domination associated with that round of life. Workmen drank with their employers, in situations that employers controlled. The informal mixing of work and leisure and of master and wage earner softened and helped legitimate inequality. At the same time drunkenness remained within the bounds of what the master considered appropriate. . . .

In the early years, disorder and insubordination were held in check, for master and wage earner worked together and slept under the same roof. Fights between workmen were rare, and when they occurred masters witnessed the intelligible and personal stream of events that led up to them. Wage earners loafed or drank or broke the Sabbath only with the master's knowledge and tacit consent. When workers lived with proprietors or within sight of them, serious breaches of the peace or of accepted standards of labor discipline were uncommon. At the very least, workingmen were constrained to act like guests, and masters enforced order easily, in the course of ordinary social and economic transactions. . . .

A generation of change . . . transformed Jefferson's republic of self-governing communities into Jackson's bolsterous capitalist democracy. . . .

Established churches, stable neighborhoods, families, authoritative local elites: these and internalized restraints of every kind were swept away by the market, by migration and personal ambition, and by the universal acceptance of democratic ideas. . . .

The drinking problem of the late 1820s stemmed directly from the new relationship between master and wage earner. Alcohol had been a builder of morale in household workshops, a subtle and pleasant bond between men. But in the 1820s proprietors turned their workshops into little factories, moved their families away from their places of business, and devised standards of discipline, self-control, and domesticity that banned liquor. By default, drinking became part of an autonomous working-class social life, and its meaning changed. . . .

By 1830 the household economy had all but passed out of existence, and so had the social order that it sustained. Work, family life, the makeup of neighborhoods—the whole pattern of society—separated class from class: master and wage earner inhabited distinct social worlds. Workmen experienced new kinds of harassment on the job. But after work they entered a fraternal, neighborhood-based society in which they were free to do what they wanted. At the same time masters devised standards of work discipline, domestic privacy, and social peace that were directly antithetical to the spontaneous and noisy sociability of the workingmen. The two worlds stood within a few yards of each other, and they fought constantly.

Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millenium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 9, 19, 48, 43, 44, 62, 55, 56-57, 60, 139.

1. Why did American observers find the early English factory system objectionable?
2. What specific factors suggested by the readings softened the social effects of the early Industrial Revolution in America?
3. What vision did early mill owners have about maintaining social control in the ideal industrial community?

7. Were Jefferson and other critics of industrialization justified in their concerns about the impact of industrialization? Explain your answer.